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THE "SOCIAL FORCES" ERROR

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At the World's Congress of Arts and Sciences which was held at St. Louis in 1904, I ventured to enter a protest against the loose way in which the word "force" is employed by sociologists, saying among other things that sociologists have no more occasion to refer to any "social force" than the biologists have to speak of a "vital force."

There is a concept of force in general, to which I raise no objection, and there is a concept of social forces in particular, which is the object of my criticism. The former is the general metaphysical concept of power. In this sense according to prevalent modern philosophy there is but One Force which underlies and continuously causes all things that do appear, and is operative in the swinging of the spheres, in the bubbling of gases, and in the chemistry of growth in every grass blade. According to the theory of evolution the operation of The Force appeared first in the simplest phenomena, not however absolutely without differences among themselves. These simple phenomena became the conditions of other phenomena which, being added to the first, made a more complex situation and afforded the conditions for still other manifestations, or as we say, other phenomena, every new kind of phenomena being added to those which had preceded to form the conditions of still higher manifestations of the One Power. Scientific explanation is the description of the situation out of which a new kind of phenomena emerges a statement of those conditions which are the necessary logical antecedents of the phenomena explained.

Now as often as we come across a kind of phenomena the conditioning of which we do not understand, we are tempted to say it is caused by a force. It is indeed caused by *The Force*

as all phenomena are, if we accept the metaphysics just outlined; but what we are tempted to say is that any particular phenomena, the conditioning of which we cannot unravel, are caused by *a* force. And if there are many kinds of phenomena which we cannot explain we suppose a large number of forces, one for each great unsolved problem in causation. This is the second meaning of the word "force," and the one to which I object. Every time that we solve one of these problems we get rid of a supposed force and replace it with a statement of the recognized combination of conditions under which the One Force operates in the causation of the phenomena thus explained.

It is in this way that we pass from what Comte called the metaphysical to what he called the positive stage of explanation. We are in the metaphysical stage as long as we imagine a number of forces, about which we know nothing save that each is the supposed cause of a kind of phenomena, the real causation of which we do not understand. We are in the scientific stage when we have replaced these "forces" with explanations stated in terms of antecedent phenomena, or when we have at least gone far enough to become convinced that such explanation is possible, so that we give up talking about the supposed force which we had used as a false denial of our ignorance and offered as a stone to the hunger of the mind. Thus biology completes the passage from the metaphysical to the scientific stage when it ceases to talk about a vital force and becomes convinced that the phenomena of life are really explicable in terms of kinds of phenomena already studied by antecedent sciences, particularly physics and chemistry. Thus also sociology will pass from the metaphysical to the scientific stage when it ceases to talk about social forces and becomes convinced that social phenomena can be explained in terms of logically antecedent phenomena.

I have referred to biology because biology is the most recent science to pass from the metaphysical to the scientific stage;*

* While sociology has only begun to free itself from the doctrine of "forces," biology has gone so far in the direction of actual scientific explanation that only a remnant of reactionaries, with hardly any representatives among American biologists of standing, continue to make use of the concept of "vital force." The leader of the reactionaries—or as an American biologist

this is because its causal problems are in general more complex and harder to solve than those of the sciences which were earlier able to attain their intellectual majority, and because it was obliged to wait for the development of those antecedent sciences which explain the kinds of phenomena which biology must use as terms in its more complex explanations. But even physics and chemistry had to make a similar transition from explanation by reference to supposed "forces" or "principles" and imaginary "substances" to actual scientific analysis and synthesis; concerning chemistry, with its "phlogiston" and "caloric," an authority in that science writes: "Until comparatively recent times the principles of metaphysical philosophy were not recognized as distinct from those of chemistry." And sociology has not yet made the transition. Notwithstanding that Comte who first pointed out the nature and necessity of the transition from the metaphysical to the scientific stage is called the first sociologist, and all other sociologists are familiar with his views upon this point, yet not all sociologists are even yet convinced that sociology can hope to pass from the metaphysical to the scientific stage in the sense of ceasing to talk of social forces, and exchanging that futile substitute for explanation for an actual statement of the conditions under which social phenomena arise, made in terms of logically antecedent phenomena.

For example, in the last *Proceedings* of the American Sociological Society (p. 195, note) Professor Ward asserts that the "social forces are the true causes of all social phenomena," and that all who deny this form of expression thereby deny

has expressed it, the arch-heretic—is Hans Driesch. It is interesting to notice that Driesch, while attempting to show that "entelechy" (a recondite name for vital force) presides over the building of hereditary traits into an organism, remarks that "of the organization, chemistry, and physics of reproductive cells scarcely anything is known at present" (*The Science and Philosophy of the Organism*, 236). The obvious reply is that if we knew more "of the chemistry and physics" of reproduction he might not feel any need to imagine this mysterious addition to the explanation which that knowledge would afford, and that in the present state of knowledge it is much too soon to give up the quest for explanation in terms of the observable and remand us to the outgrown doctrine of "vitalism." I notice also that Driesch welcomes, as the most incontrovertible confirmation of his teaching from any other writer, Noll's doctrine of "morphaesthesia," or feeling for shape, which he attributes to vegetation, as what causes the branches of a tree "to resume their proper angle with regard to their orientation on the main axis, if this orientation has been disturbed" (*ibid.*, 146 and 157).

that sociology can be a true science. I would say rather that only by denying this can they successfully assert the claim of sociology to be a true science. In that connection Professor Ward referred to some statements of mine, one of which is as follows:

It seems probable that a large part of the divergence and uncertainty concerning the scope of sociology has been due to a reluctance to treat the problems of human life and activity by strictly scientific methods. . . . Sociology has nothing to do with any metaphysical concepts that may be thought to underlie social phenomena. Sociology has to do only with phenomena and with relations among phenomena. . . .

In order to secure agreement as to the scope of a science, it is first necessary to agree as to what phenomena the science is to describe and explain, but it is no less necessary to agree as to what is meant by explanation. . . . It is only by explaining how things are caused that we acquire ability to cause anything desirable; by such enlightenment we are enabled to discern the courses of action that lead to good and those that lead to evil, and are supplied with motives to pursue the one and shun the other.

I wish to protest against the idea that we can explain social phenomena by referring them to various "social forces." The habit, almost universal among sociologists, of referring frequently to "social forces" I believe is a bad one that ought to be broken. The temptation to use it lies in its metaphysical quality of drugging the mind's hunger for explanation with a false satisfaction by yielding the complaisance of understanding without the labor of obstinate analysis. . . . Explanation of the phenomenon x (in the case of sociology oftenest a prevalent mode of activity) consists in showing the phenomenon x in its relations to the conditioning phenomena a, b, c , etc., in the presence of which x emerges, by the increase of which x increases, and by the diminution of which x diminishes. . . . Sociological explanation can relate prevalent modes of activity to the conditions by virtue of which they become prevalent at one place and time and not at another, with the increase of which, in passing to another place or time, they increase in prevalence, and with the diminution of which they diminish in prevalence.

We may never be able to predict which individual will become a drunkard, but we can tell that with variation in certain conditions of climate, diet, domicile, employment, social approvals, and beliefs, the prevalence of drunkenness will vary. We may not be able to predict which individuals will act in a certain way, any more than the actuary can predict which man out of a thousand will die within a year, though he does know that the average death rate for a year will fall within certain limits; or any more than the student of physiology and hygiene can predict which indi-

vidual in a neighborhood will die of typhoid fever, although he does know that the prevalence of typhoid fever in that neighborhood is due to certain conditions, and that the abatement of such conditions would diminish its prevalence or stamp it out entirely. The importance both practical and scientific of similar knowledge with reference to social phenomena is not to be disparaged.

Does not an adequate basis for a working agreement among sociologists require concurrence as to these two points? First, the phenomena studied by sociology are explicable; that is, a sociological phenomenon—as really as any—is conditioned by other phenomena; second, to enable us to see the sociological phenomena in their relations to the conditioning phenomena is to afford the explanation sought, etc.¹

The dependence upon "social forces" for the explanation of social phenomena is carried throughout the works of Professor Ward; as he himself puts it, this doctrine "underlies his entire philosophy."² Indeed in his view

the principal characteristic of a true science is that it is a domain of natural phenomena produced by a special class of forces. The forces producing social phenomena are the social forces, and taken together they constitute the dynamic agent. . . . The dynamic agent consists wholly in feeling. . . . The social forces are wants seeking satisfaction through efforts. . . . They are all primarily physical or physiological, even those classed as spiritual, for the organism is the only source from which they can emanate. . . . All the social forces represent the innate interests of mankind, and whatever interests prompt to action. . . . The fact which it is important to note just at this point is that feeling constitutes the dynamic agent. . . . Now feeling is a true cosmic force.³

Professor Ward agrees with all that was said above about the One Force, except that instead of saying a new class of phenomena which rises as a result of the combination of previous phenomena is in turn added to its predecessors to form with them the conditions necessary to the appearance of yet higher manifestations of the One Force, he would say that the properties or behavior of a new class of phenomena although only a new "modality of the one universal force" may not only with convenience but with practical correctness be treated as a new force,⁴ and that the new and "distinct" forces thus coming into operation cause the phenomena which are to be studied by

¹ *American Journal of Sociology*, XII, 652.

³ *Pure Sociology*, 99, 256, 261.

² *Applied Sociology*, 43.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

the distinct sciences, and that there cannot be a distinct science which is not devoted to the field of operation of a "distinct force."

Further, he says that above the "vibration" of ether there are four of these distinct forces, "chemism, bathmism, zoism, and psychism";⁵ these are the demiurges of this mythology. But feeling is the fundamental form of psychism and the only one which is a "true force" and "the feelings had a much earlier origin than the intellect" belonging "to all creatures above the protozoa certainly, and perhaps to these also,"⁶ so that "during a prolonged period they constituted the only psychic manifestations, and do so still throughout practically the entire animal world."⁷ Feeling, we are thus told, is the force which underlies the animal consciousness that so long preceded intellect, which underlies all psychology, and also sociology. Where, then, is that "distinct" force which is to underlie a distinct science of sociology, defined as the study of "human achievement"? If there are but five cosmic forces, where does he obtain a distinct force to underlie each of all the sciences? Especially if feeling is the only psychic force, where does he get a distinct force to underlie sociology as distinguished from psychology? This is answered by saying⁸ that as the one cosmic force manifests itself in five cosmic forces, so also the psychic force or feeling manifests itself in various ways, a part of which are the social forces, so that it is "practically correct" not only to speak of a "social force" but of "a plurality of social forces." The "distinct" force upon which the science of sociology is based is a *portion* of the operation of feelings, and this "distinct" force is itself divisible into as many distinct "forces" as there are modes of human feeling. This is the justification offered for the claim that sociology is a study of the sphere of operation of a distinct force, and for the declaration that those who deny that sociology studies the operations of a distinct force thereby deny the possibility of a science of sociology! No one is likely to submit to being "read

⁵ *Pure Sociology*, 94, 101.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

out of the party" of sociologists on any such ground as that, but one is more likely to be enough of an "insurgent" to raise the question whether any foundation for a valid system of sociology can be afforded by a body of teaching, learned as it is and wise in many other respects, which is grounded upon the dogma that sociology can be a science if, and only if, its explanations are made to consist in ascribing its phenomena to so-called "distinct forces" thus conceived.

Let us observe more precisely what this is which we are asked to regard as the cause of social phenomena, reference to which is said to constitute adequate scientific explanation, in order that it may appear clearly whether it is well to call it the social force, or even force at all, and also whether the reference of social phenomena to it does constitute their scientific explanation. It is not "inducement or purpose,"⁹ not any specific desire or aim, it does not involve any thought of a definable good. Such motives—e.g., the desire to be governor, or to escape the penitentiary—are social products rather than social forces. The definite wants which move society are, in fact, among the most characteristic of the phenomena which are to be explained by sociology, rather than to be taken as data, or given terms from which explanation may set out. Says Professor Ward, the "desire" which is "social force" is "a psychic condition resulting primarily from restraint, exerted by the impinging environment, to motor activity, and when strong enough it overcomes these barriers and causes activity. It is a sensation, and it must be regarded as an unpleasant sensation."¹⁰ Thus he states the essence of his "philosophy of desire." This definition of the so-called "social force" includes reference to the following phenomena: (1) action caused when (2) a restraining environment impinges upon (3) motor activity occasioning (4) a "sensation" or "feeling," a more or less unpleasant accompanying state of consciousness.

It is this fourth, this more or less unpleasant feeling or sensation, which is *the* social force, and to deny that it is the

⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

"distinct force" which causes all social phenomena is to deny that there can be a science of sociology!

If any of the four phenomena referred to in this definition of social force deserve to be called a force it is not that which he defines as such, but that which he calls "motor activity" upon which a restraining environment impinges, or in other words the functioning psychophysical organism. In a passage quoted above Professor Ward recognizes that the so-called forces "are all primarily physical or physiological, for the organism is the only source from which they can emanate."

In the mode of thought which I am proposing nothing is omitted which is included in his statement, but all of the four elements which he mentions in his "philosophy of desire" are included. Only I maintain that instead of talking of feeling as a cosmic force and *the* social cause, we ought rather to say that the living psychophysical organism, the consummate biological product, is the last complex resultant of the cosmic process to be added to the conditioning phenomena before the final and most complex phenomena of all can emerge, namely, those studied by sociology; that the psychophysical organisms of men with their inherited and acquired tendencies to react upon stimuli are the physiological conditions of social activities; and that the "impinging environment" is made up of geographic conditions, such as pinching or genial climate, hungry desert or bountiful forest and plain, mountain barriers or inviting harbors; of technic conditions such as roads, tools, and houses, the products of the past invention and labor of mankind; and of the present social activities which lap us round and appeal to our imitateness. And it is only by identifying all these divers kinds of conditioning phenomena and observing how they form into effective causal combinations that we can scientifically explain the emergence of the corresponding varieties of social activity, and not by attributing them to an uncomfortable disquietude which is felt when the impinging environment restrains our organic tendencies to activity, said discomfort being designated a "cosmic force" and the "distinct cause" of all social phenomena. The general forms of causation which ex-

plain the differences between the practices of Romans, Turks, and Frenchmen, which separate contrasting civilizations, or contrasting centuries, or contrasting social classes, cannot truthfully be stated in terms of differences of feeling, feeling being so defined as to omit all ideas of objects desired or purposes regarded. Feeling, *in that sense*, need be included in the explanation only as we regard the universal organic tendencies of human nature or the differing organic tendencies of separate races and temperaments or of the children of the well-housed and the well-fed as contrasted with those of the children of the devitalized and debauched as *among the conditions* (not forces) which are to be included in the explanation. Putting on the one hand that so-called explanation which consists merely in attributing social activities to feelings, as above defined by Professor Ward and by him designated social forces, and on the other hand that explanation which is sought by unraveling the complex conditioning out of which social activities arise, and to the modifications in which the modifications in such activities correspond, we have before us two extremely contrasted views of the proper task of sociology.

The mischief of the error under consideration does not consist in calling *The Force* by one name as it produces one class of phenomena and by another name as it produces another class of phenomena, but it consists in thinking that in ascribing a given class of phenomena either to the One Force or to a "distinct" force we have accomplished anything of scientific importance. Scientific explanation does not consist in referring phenomena back to a metaphysical abstraction, but in revealing the causal or conditioning relationships between phenomena. To insist that there can be no distinct science save as it corresponds to the sphere of operation of a "distinct force," and to construct a "pure science" which consists in discussing how we should conceive the operation of the "forces" involved is merely a substitute for science, and real science is not achieved until the conditioning of the given phenomena by antecedent and accompanying phenomena is set forth. To pursue concepts of "forces" to correspond to the phenomena observed and satisfy

the mind instead of their explanation is to delay and postpone the pursuit of actual scientific explanation.

A knowledge of the causation or conditioning of phenomena by each other enables us to secure practical modification in results by properly disposing the conditions, but explanation of the metaphysical sort proposed by Professor Ward is capable of no such practical application. Upon the title-page of his *Applied Sociology* Professor Ward has placed this quotation: "L'application est la pierre de touche de toute doctrine." It is significant that in this volume of "applied sociology" he makes no practical use of his "pure science" of social forces, though he reiterates that doctrine. His practical suggestions relate entirely to the modifying of activities by means of modifying the conditioning environment, especially in such a way as to diffuse knowledge, the diffusion of which he declares to be the only live problem for applied sociology.

To note a few minor inconsistencies not essential to the main argument: he says that feeling is the essence of the highest of the five cosmic forces, psychism, yet realizes that psychic phenomena begin with sensation, which is the incipient stage of intellection quite as much as of feeling.¹¹ He might have said that psychism is the force underlying both intellection and feeling. He does say it is feeling.

Further, the question is not so much what in the remote evolutionary genesis gave rise to the first social phenomena, as what in every stage of history, and every day of the present, causes the rise, continuance, and change of social phenomena. He answers, it is the social force or feeling, and says that feeling is the cause of prevalent ideas or beliefs, but that "belief does not cause desire."¹² Yet he also says, only a page away, "ideas give rise to feelings, or prompt, or cause, or occasion emotions,"¹³ and his one practical counsel is to diffuse ideas, declaring that if scientific ideas are sufficiently diffused *they* will save the world.¹⁴ The truth is that ideas condition feelings and feelings condition ideas, *each* playing its part in the mutual

¹¹ *Applied Sociology*, 458.

¹² *Ibid.*, 46.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

conditioning of phenomena by each other, which is the scientific conception of causation, but neither is a creative force, which is the erroneous, anachronistic, and metaphysical conception of causation.

Any attempt to say which, feeling or thought, plays the more dominant rôle in the continuous process of social causation is useless, but if such an attempt is to be made then it is at least equally justifiable to reverse his statement and give the dominant place to thought. Indeed, as just pointed out, he seems forced to that reversal, when he turns from "pure" theory to application in real life. And in fact without intellection the feelings which are called social forces or causes cannot exist, so that it would be nearer to a truth to say that intellection is the antecedent cause, the *sine qua non* of feeling, and that feeling modifies thought only by secondary reaction, in so far as intellection winces and tends to turn aside or stop when the resulting feelings are painful, and to proceed when they are pleasurable. According to what is, to say the least, a plausible psychological hypothesis, intellection is the inrush of the objective world impinging upon the organism, and feeling and action are the resultant outgo.

Again, Professor Ward might have devoted a paragraph to reconciling the doctrine of "social forces," or "feeling as the dynamic agent," with the curious declaration which he reiterates in other connections,¹⁵ that "matter alone is dynamic." The truth is that material things play a mighty part in the conditioning of social phenomena, that no force affords their causal explanation, but the totality of related facts, material, i.e., geographic and technic, as well as physiologic and psychic.

Once more: one root of confusion in thought seems to be the failure, by no means peculiar to any one writer, to distinguish, consistently, between feeling or feelings or desires, as psychic realities, that is, as existing in consciousness, and conditioning and conditioned by other psychic realities, on the one hand, and on the other, the physiological capacity for or tendency toward the various feelings; but even the latter is not

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 48; *Pure Sociology*, 30, 32, 254, 255.

a force, but like the nervous system as a whole, or even the hand or the stomach, is *a condition* of the social activities.

In discussing the doctrine of social forces, and contrasting it with what seems to me the scientific conception of sociological explanation, I have taken my text from Professor Ward, partly because his pronunciamento against all who dissent from this dogma invited a reply, and partly because his writings, saturated as they are with a view which to me seems so erroneous and so obstructive to scientific progress, have attained so great an influence; but the importance of the subject is indefinitely heightened by the fact that so many other sociologists entertain the same view, that indeed extremely few have wholly escaped out of the blind alley of semi-metaphysical quasi-explanation by means of reference to supposed forces, into the high road of scientific explanation by reference of problem phenomena to conditioning phenomena.

To summarize: The most obvious, not to say superficial, way of accounting for human actions is to refer them to "motives." In this way "feelings" or "interests" are regarded by a large class of writers as "the social forces" or "causes." According to the view which I present this is an error. The feelings, as conscious experiences, are not causes antecedent and external to the social activities, any more than digestion is an external cause of physical life, but are integral parts in the human activities which are to be explained; while the organic capacities for feeling, together with the capacities for intellection, are both included in one out of the four kinds of causal conditions of social activity, namely, the organic, geographic, technic, and social. To account for social activity by reference to man's organic capacities alone, and only one portion of the organic capacities at that, or to account for such activity as caused by one element in the activity itself, is unscientific. The organic capacities or tendencies of human nature, besides being the most obvious conditions of social activity, are perhaps, in spite of individual and racial variations, less variable than the geographic conditions, still less so than the technic, and yet less so than the causal relationships

between social activities themselves.¹⁶ Must we add that being less variable they are to the same extent less important in explaining the variations or specific concrete manifestations of social activity, and especially that by being not only less variable by nature but less modifiable by human effort they are less important objects of study with reference to the possible applications of sociological knowledge? At any rate we must say that reference of social activities to the "social force" does not constitute a proper idea of sociological explanation and that sociology abandoning quasi-explanation by reference to so-called forces must adopt the method of other sciences and account for its realities in terms of conditioning phenomena and relations between phenomena. If its explanations should become complete enough to justify prophecy, its forecast would be framed like this: given a population whose psychophysical *organisms* have such and such recognized tendencies, set in the midst of such and such a *material* environment, supplied in part by nature and in part by the labor of man, and in such and such a *social* environment, consisting of the already prevalent activities, then such and such further activities will on the whole thereafter prevail, and if given modifications are now introduced into their physical or social environment such and such changes in the prevalent activities will ensue.

No amount of reference of social activities to feelings can constitute a scientific explanation of them, or open the way to the desired practical applications. "L'application est la pierre de touche de toute doctrine." Rather, in given physical and social environment, men of given organic predispositions will in general and on the whole respond with certain feelings, which are a part of the activity to be explained by science and to be induced or repressed by social practice, and not the causes antecedent to social activity.

¹⁶That which we call social psychology is mostly a study of this conditioning of social activities by each other.